DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 541 CS 014 507

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TITLE Why Do Schoolchildren Enjoy Reading? The Construction of an Explanatory Model.
PUB DATE 2001-07-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the European Reading Conference (12th, Dublin, Ireland, July 1-4, 2001). "The research project, Reading and Attention is supported by a grant from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science".
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Intermediate Grades; Literature Appreciation; *Models; *Reading Attitudes; Reading Research; Secondary Education; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Reading Behavior

ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s good readers in low-achieving countries saw reading mostly as a difficult, effortful process while those in high-achieving countries saw reading more as a pleasant, imaginative activity: for them reading was first and foremost enjoyable. This paper attempts to elucidate this concept of reading as enjoyment and tries to determine which aspects of reading behavior contribute to the experience of reading pleasure. After an analysis of 1,537 questionnaires completed by pupils aged 9-18, the paper constructs a model of the relations among 8 aspects of reading behavior, including enjoyment. This model indicates that over 50% of reading pleasure can be explained by 7 aspects, that is, by the interaction among absorbed attention while reading, reading for distraction or for excitement, processes of imagination, emotion and reminiscence due to reading, and frequency of spontaneous reading behavior. The paper discusses the model and its paths, including weight of contribution of each aspect, directly and indirectly, to enjoyment. It uses comments from children who compared experiences while reading or while playing computer games as an illustration of the concepts in the model. (Contains 19 references, 2 notes, and a figure of data.) (Author/RS)

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Paper presented at the European Conference on Reading,
St. Patricks's College, Dublin, July 1-4, 2001

The research project Reading and Attention is supported by a grant from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science on recommendation by Stichting Lezen, the Dutch platform for reading promotion.

CS 014 507

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Why do schoolchildren enjoy reading?

The construction of an explanatory model.

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Abstract

In the early nineties good readers in low-achieving countries saw reading mostly as a difficult, effortfull process while those in high-achieving countries saw reading more as a pleasant, imaginative activity: for them reading was first and foremost enjoyable.
We attempted to elucidate this concept of reading as enjoyment and tried to determine which aspects of reading behaviour contributed to the experience of reading pleasure. After an analysis of 1537 questionnaires completed by pupils aged 9-18 we were able to construct a model of the relations between 8 aspects of reading behaviour including enjoyment. This model indicates that over 50 percent of reading pleasure can be explained by 7 aspects, that is by the interaction between absorbed attention while reading, reading for distraction or for excitement, processes of imagination, emotion and reminiscence due tot reading and also frequency of spontaneous reading behaviour.
In our presentation we discuss the model and its paths, including weight of contribution of each aspect, directly and indirectly, to enjoyment.
We use comments from children who compared experiences while reading or while playing computer games as an illustration of the concepts in the model.

Introduction

In the early nineties good readers in low-achieving countries saw reading mostly as a difficult, effortfull process while those in high-achieving countries saw reading more as a pleasant imaginative activity: for them reading was first and foremost enjoyable. (Elley 1992)
We attempted to elucidate this concept of reading as enjoyment and tried to determine which aspects of reading behaviour contributed tot the experience of reading pleasure.

At the University of Amsterdam we noticed in 1975 the scarcity of factual information about the pleasure of reading as such, separate from the pleasure of reading certain books. (This was before studies by authors such as Rosenblatt (1978), Fry (1985) and Millard (1997) were published.) We decided to devote a lot of space to the judgements of readers, especially to those of children and young people.

Description of the research

As a starting point, we asked pupils to write compositions on 'My experiences while reading', 'I read books because…" etcetera. From a few hundred compositions we selected statements on particular satisfactions derived from reading which we then discussed in interviews with individual pupils. Most pupils were quite interested in the subject. A few examples taken from their comments: "I forget the time. Sometimes I'm really into the book. Then I no longer know that I'm at home. Then I experience an adventure too, like she experiences in the book" (girl, aged 11, on absorption). "When I have to sit in the car going to my granny's, I get bored. Then I read a book, when it is really exciting the time goes very quickly" (boy, aged 12, on mood control). "I feel with that girl in the book. She could not read very well, she was a little dumb. Almost every Saturday she got a lot of bad marks" (girl, aged 13, on emotion). "It's just as though it really happened because you're the only one who is reading the book and it is just as if you walk with someone and experience all that" (boy, aged 10, on imagination).

The list of statements resulting from these procedures was subsequently divided up according to the aspects of reading behaviour they referred to and included in separate questionnaires for these different aspects, such as absorbed attention while reading; the use of reading for mood control, that is, reading to maintain or restore mental equilibrium; processes of imagination or emotion due to reading; enjoyment while reading and thinking about a text afterwards. Each

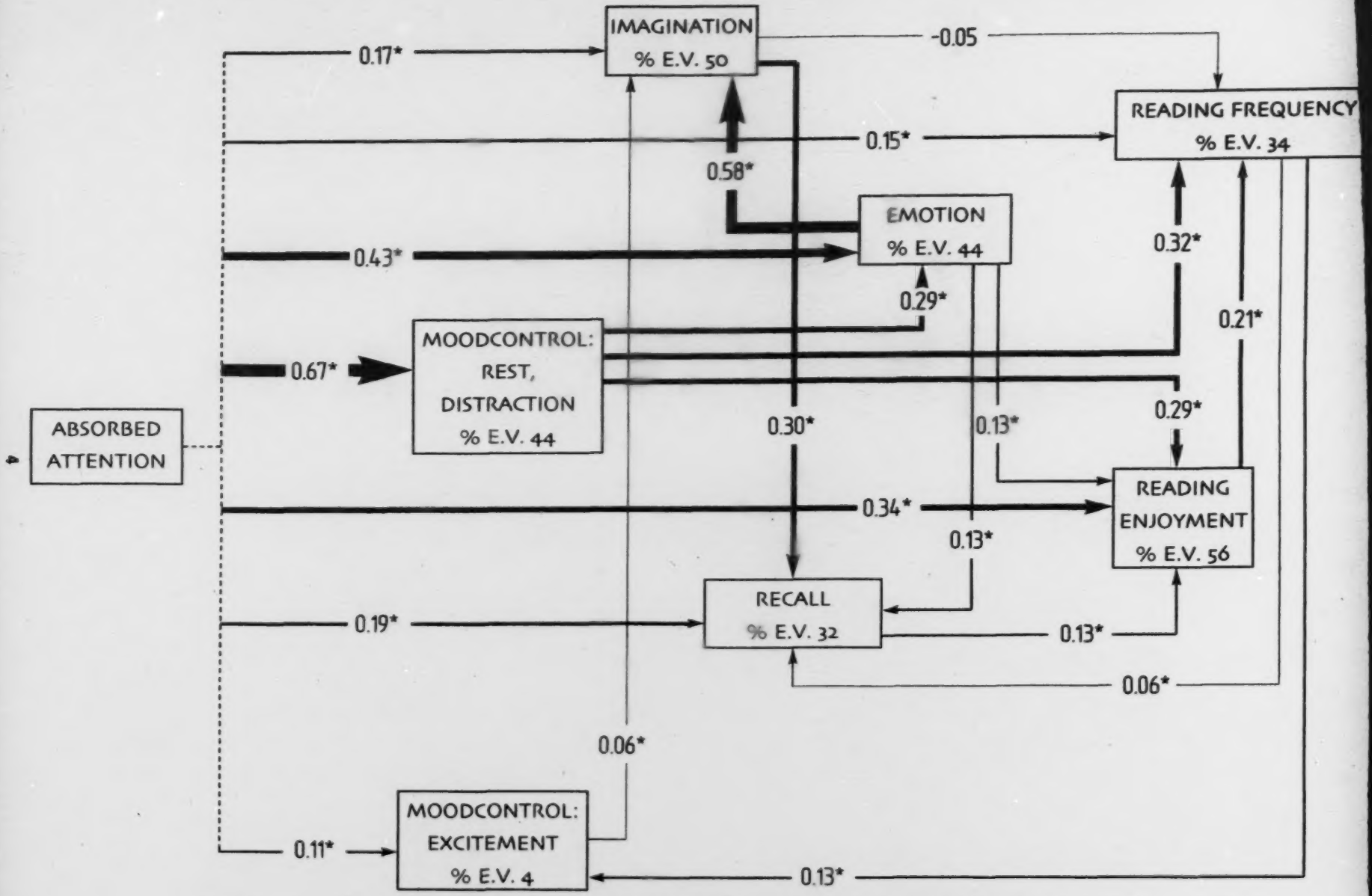

Figure 1: Model, path coefficients and explained variance:spontaneous reading behavior

questionnaire was completed by either 1500 or 3000 pupils aged 9 to 18, and the data analysed. This analysis[1] enabled us to select for each aspect those statements that best conveyed the meaning of that aspect, thus reducing the number of questions about statements to an amount that could be included in full in one final questionnaire, completed by a representative sample of 1537 pupils. Their answers enabled us to construct a model of interaction between important aspects of spontaneous reading behaviour, indicating that over 50 percent of reading enjoyment can be explained by its interaction[2] with 7 aspects of reading behaviour (Frankhuisen & Tellegen 2000). The fact that some interactions as shown in the model, such as the contribution of emotional and imaginative experiences to recall, have been established by others (Sadoski & Quast 1990; Schraw & Bruning 1996) confirms the plausibility of the model.

Attention and motivation

We'll now discuss some details of the model. The model shows, besides reading enjoyment itself, 7 different aspects of reading behaviour that represent 4 different phenomena.
From left to right we see first the aspect of absorbed attention. Attention occurs in two forms., intentional attention which is effortfull and unintentional attention, which continues as a matter of course and is effortless (Tellegen & Frankhuisen 1998; 1999) Here, attention is only represented by unintentional or absorbed attention.
Next to attention we see two aspects of the phenomenon of reading motivation. Within reading motivation there are two main categories. Firstly, reading for recreation or distraction, that is for mood control and secondly reading as a means to achieve another goal, such as knowledge or prestige, which we refer to as instrumental reading. Instrumental reading turns out to be of no importance in this model. Reading for mood control was subdivided into reading for relaxation and distraction at the one hand and reading for excitement on the other.

Experiential processes and recall

The next aspects- imagination, emotion and recall- are experiences due to reading. They differ from reading attention or reading motivation in that they play an important but not essential part in spontaneous reading behaviour. Without motivation and attention, the book is not picked up, the reading does not come about. Motivation and attention are necessary or primary aspects of reading behaviour. Processes of emotion and imagination during reading

and of recall after reading enhance the significance of the reading experience and contribute to the enjoyment of reading, but reading without such processes is possible, therefore these are secondary aspects of reading behaviour (Tellegen & Catsburg 1987, van der Bolt & Tellegen 1996, van der Bolt 2000). Also these processes are the result of interaction between text and reader, they are unpredictable for the reader. Readers don't know beforehand if a text will leave them cold or will evoke a variety of experiences.

As you see, we included three secondary aspects in the model. For the aspect of imagination we included identification with a character, projecting oneself into a story, visualisation and auditive experiences due to the reading of a text. For the aspect of emotion we included happy or euphoric and unpleasant or dysphoric feelings and feelings of surprise and recognition. For the aspect of recall we included those traces of a text in memory that either occurred spontaneously to the reader or could be called up intentionally.

Frequency of reading behaviour

The last phenomenon in the model, frequency of spontaneous reading behaviour, differentiates between those pupils who read regularly in their spare time, that is, those who read in a book at least once a week and read at least one book every three weeks versus those who read less often.

The model and its paths

Let us now look at the model as a whole. We see two kinds of numbers either in the arrows or in the boxes. Those in the arrows are path coefficients, which stand for weight of contribution. Weight of contribution is also represented by the width of each arrow. The numbers in the boxes represent the percentage of variance of each phenomenon that is explained by its connection with the other phenomena in the model.

We knew from an earlier investigation (Catsburg & Tellegen 1988) that absorbed attention is a necessary condition for the occurrence of most of the other phenomena. Therefore we used that concept as the starting point of the model. When a concept is put at the beginning of a model the explained variance of that concept itself is not calculated, only its influence on the other parts. We can see that absorbed attention contributes to reading enjoyment in several different ways.

Directly: from attention to enjoyment and indirectly: by way of intentional distraction, emotion or recall. Also by more circuitous paths of this kind.

Let us now look at some important roads and junctions in the model, namely those in the vicinity of intentional distraction, emotion and imagination. Both absorbed attention and reading for distraction have a strong influence on emotion. In other words, when a child is able to lose itself in a book and when it uses this skill regularly to control its mood by reading, thus distancing itself from the strains and stresses of daily life, then it is quite likely that this child also experiences emotional involvement while reading.

A boy of eleven described such behaviour as follows: "When I'm angry and I don't want to talk about it, then I read a book, then I'm in another world and don't have to think about, for instance, a quarrel with my brother. I love reading, but not out loud, that's too slow. Then, when something awful happens in the story but it ends well, then inside me I'm really glad, just as if something good happened in reality."

This boy clearly reads with effortless, absorbed attention, he uses this skill to forget about the quarrel and, while distracted, becomes emotionally involved in the story. Such emotional involvement, in its turn, influences imaginative involvement as we'll illustrate with the next examples.

Another boy, also aged eleven, says: "If I don't experience feelings, then I only read it, then I don't see it in front of my eyes, then you don't really know how it is over there.'

A woman, a junior civil servant, remarks: "I see the people in the story, like a film. Most of them. The face, their size and hair colour. Not with everybody, only when I like them. With Grijpstra and de Gier (cops in a detective story) that young fellow I see, moustache, dark hair. And their boss, nice fellow, the image I have of him is that he's small and bald. Grijpstra I don't see, he doesn't appeal to me."

Experiential involvement

Experiential involvement in a story, be it imaginative or emotional, is important for us when we want to stimulate reading enjoyment. Because when we look at the other concepts in this model, we see phenomena which, by their nature, cannot be taught directly. One can order a child to get lost, one cannot instruct it to get lost in a book. Absorbed reading, reading for mood control and remembering those parts of a story that were appealing are phenomena that readers have to discover of their own accord. We can help children by creating circumstances favourable for such discoveries but that is about all we can do. Emotional and imaginative

processes due to the reading of books are phenomena that offer the teacher at least something to go by. Barton (1996) and Dirksen (1995), among others, have shown that it is possible to teach pupils how to progress on the road to emotional involvement while reading. Wilhelm (1997) and van den Berg (van den Berg & Middel 1992) have done the same for imaginative involvement. In the work of these authors the teaching of emotional and imaginative response to stories is described explicitly.
The idea that pupils can be helped to become aware of such processes and subsequently can be helped to expand their capacity for such experiences is apparent in the work of many others, for example in the book Developing Response to Fiction by Protherough (1983).

The importance of experiential involvement

Emotional and imaginative experiences while reading are stepping stones on the road to reading enjoyment. Awareness and expansion of emotional and imaginative involvement in a text can be integrated in the teaching of reading and of literature. The possibility to teach these experiences is an important aspect of these phenomena. And there is yet another aspect that we noticed when we compared the attraction of reading books with the attraction of playing computer games. The reading of books seems to be more suitable for deeper emotional and imaginative involvement than computer games can provide.
In preparation for an investigation into the attraction of books versus computer games we discussed this subject with 25 pupils aged 10, 11 and 12. Quite a few of them considered computer games more absorbing, more distracting and more exciting than books. They also considered experiential involvement in books better than, or at least different from, involvement in computer games.
An eleven year old boy explained this as follows: "In a computer game I'm more myself, with a book I'm the main character. And when I'm racing in a game, and I hit the side, I don't mind, I try again and then in the right way. But when I have a friend in the book – me the main character, he also in the book – and that one is ill or something, then I begin to feel sorry for him because he is now my friend. I then become a bit sad and then I want to save him. With computer games I don't have that."
A ten year old girl said: "With the games I laugh about, say, beings from outer space or babies. With books I laugh when something funny happens. But when I feel lonely the first thing that enters my mind is often reading. I join in a with what the characters do, you see, and then I feel a bit better already. There was a book about four children and it was just as if I

knew them already for ages. Then they are really my friends. I don't have that with computer games." An eleven year old girl remarked: "With computer games I think it's me, with a fish in the net, under water. With the book 'Rosemary', it's just as if I know her and her girlfriends, then I have read the book and it's just as if it really happened. That doesn't occur to me in computer games."
A twelve year old girl said: "When it says in the book that the wind rushes past her ears then I feel that too, the cold and the rain, and when they do something such as fighting then I squeeze the book, sometimes so strongly that I'm tired when I have finished it. My copy of 'Crusade in Jeans' is covered in nail markings, because I was so involved. My mother doesn't experience it like that and I can't understand that. At home I also play computer games, in the weekend. We have Nintendo, a Gameboy and a computer. But with games I don't have that."

At the moment we are analysing the data from a questionnaire on the reading of books and the playing of computer games, completed by 574 pupils aged 13 to 18. More than twice as many of them felt empathy or pity while reading than while playing. From remarks and answers such as these we get the impression that feelings and fantasies evoked by the reading of books are deeper and also more meaningful to children than feelings and fantasies evoked by playing computer games. Recently we discussed the attraction of books versus the attraction of computer games with 300 individuals, pupils and adults, and we concluded that it is very likely that, when helping children to become aware of their emotional and imaginative involvement while reading, we are also helping them to become aware of the fact that reading is attractive and that there are reasons why the reading of books is more satisfying than the playing of computer games.

Conclusion

We constructed the model because the concept of reading enjoyment was rather vague and elusive. We hoped to create a more tangible basis for this concept: the pleasure of reading. We have succeeded, at the end of a long-term project in which many students and colleagues cooperated, in constructing a model which shows at least half the roots of reading enjoyment. We hope that such a model and the lines of thought evoked by it will be useful for those who promote books and reading. We consider that the promotion of reading is at the moment more important than ever as many children and especially boys find computer games more absorbing and more convenient for mood control than any other medium including the book.

Unless we are able to make it clear to children that the reading of books can enable them not only to explore the world by way of stories but also to experience these stories through their own emotions and imagination resulting in their own personal store of memories, the book will continue to lose ground, ground that will be taken over by the computer game. Of course, children do derive comfort by way of mood control from computer games, just like they derive comfort from books. But the side effects of playing computer games are in the areas of mastery, self-confidence and cognitive capacities (Alink 2001). The side effects of the reading of books are in the areas of imaginative and emotional experiences, which can contribute to the development of empathy, and of a better understanding of self and others.

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[1] The data were analysed on the basis of the following:
Mokken, R.J. (1971). A theory and procedure of scale analysis with applications in political research. New York/Berlin: De Gruyter/Mouton

[2] The model was constructed on the basis of the following: Saris, W. & Stronkhorst, H. (1984). Causal modelling in non-experimental research. An introduction to the LISREL approach. Amsterdam: Sociometric Research Foundation.

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